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ABSTRACT

A university English professor discusses a class effort to develop concepts concerning lyric poetry and to apply them to specific poems. Problems arising from the different manners in which authors present their poems are described. Poetic order and emphasis are examined. (CK)

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PROBLEMS OF REPRESENTATION IN LYRIC POETRY

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We learn from our errors, a principle every honest teacher acknowledges. Recently this bromide was brought home to me in an advanced class on the analysis of lyric poetry. My students were all English majors, seniors and first-year graduates, bright, eager, critical, and articulate. We had been formulating, for half a semester, some concepts of the theory of lyric poetry and applying them to a wide range of individual poems. Briefly, we had been dealing, in a rather specific way, with two major kinds of short lyrics: didactic poems, those which present persuasively some thesis or doctrine; and mimetic poems, those which portray a brief span of human behavior. Didactic poems seek to convince the reader of the worth of some proposition; mimetic poems arouse in him specific kinds of pleasure at the depiction of individuals behaving in a certain way—moved by passion, or deliberating about a serious problem, or acting.[1] This division worked remarkably well, and by using it both my students and I gained considerable insight into a number of poems. Certain principles are, of course, distinctive for each category, and with those I shall not be concerned in this paper.

One problem, however, is common to both didactic and mimetic lyrics: the *manner* in which they are written. Recognizing that this was a crucial factor in the analysis of these poems, I had indicated to the class at the beginning of the semester that we should eventually consider also problems of presentation or representation. In other words, we should be dealing not only with the *what*, but with the *how*. And here I came a cropper.

But let me be more precise.

I had assumed that the *manner* in lyric poetry must be either dramatic, or narrative, or some mixture of the two. Exactly how it operated in individual poems would depend on whether they

[1] Some readers may recognize here principles developed by Elder Olson, Norman Maclean, and the late R. S. Crane. For what follows in this article, however, I take full responsibility. I wish to acknowledge here also my very great debt to my students in English 515A in the Autumn Semester, 1969, at the State University of New York at Albany: Raymond Austin, Barbara Davis, Natalie Feldman, Marie Gandron, Cheryl Heater, Diane Irwin, Ann Kocynda, Mary Macura, Elizabeth Marcolini, Sharon Mitchell, Doris Pedersen, Kimberly Pisarra, Linda Sacks, Edward Schmidt, Ralph Ware, Jennifer Waters, and Wendy Zverblis.

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were didactic or mimetic. For example, in a didactic poem the development of the argument supporting the doctrine would determine the ordering of the parts, whereas in a mimetic poem they would be ordered according to the principles of necessity or probability. But in either case, when I presented the dramatic-narrative outline to the class, I found that—in the examples I chose—this appeared to be a very workable distinction. Browning's mimetic poem, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church," for example, is clearly dramatic in its manner of representation. An aged bishop is lying on his death-bed, his mind wandering, talking to his illegitimate sons, in particular Anselm. And although none of them answers him in the poem, clearly much of what he says is dictated by their responses, as revealed by their facial expressions and their actions. In other words, while this poem is of course in no sense a drama, still, without stretching the concept too much, we might consider it as something comparable to a *scene*.

On the other hand, in a poem like "Mr. Flood's Party," by Edwin Arlington Robinson, we clearly have a narrator who functions much like one in a short story told from the third-person point of view. Robinson's narrator relates an episode involving a lonely old man returning one night from a visit to the village, and stopping on the way to his upland hermitage to get drunk all alone in the moonlight. Moreover, the narrator comments on this poor old fellow: Eben Flood is both valiant and gentle, as we know because he is compared not only to Charlemagne's knight Roland, but also to a mother laying her sleeping child to rest. And the narrator makes explicit the pathos of Eben's situation: there is "not much . . . ahead of him, / And . . . nothing in the town below— / Where strangers would have shut the many doors / That many friends had opened long ago." Similarly, in Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues," we also have a narrator who is telling us *about* a character: a Negro musician who sings a blues song, accompanying himself on the piano, his "ebony hands on each ivory key" making "that poor piano moan with melody." Like Robinson's narrator, Hughes's also comments directly on the protagonist, describing his "deep song voice with a melancholy tone."

So far so good. This dramatic-narrative dichotomy worked beautifully (I thought). But then it began to fall apart.

I had asked my students each to write a paper analyzing the manner of representation in some serious lyric poem of their own choice. But the assignment was unsuccessful. Instead, I was forced to admit that my directions had been misleading, and we had to start all over again.

For instead of choosing such obvious examples of dramatic or narrative representation as I had done, many students had selected border-line cases, and had tried to analyze them according to my instructions. While they exhibited a good deal of Prokrustean ingenuity in cutting off the poems to make them fit the dramatic-narrative beds, they were in several cases promptly challenged by their classmates, some rather cogent debates ensued, and both sides appealed to me as referee.

Alas! I found myself in the humiliating position of not being able to decide, on any rational grounds, *which* manner of representation a number of the poems my students had selected utilized. To be specific (as they were), take Auden's "The Unknown Citizen." Is the speaker in this didactic poem really telling us about a certain average man (in which case we should say the manner is narrative), or is Auden presenting a speaker whose own revulsion from conformity is portrayed by the way in which he talks rather cynically about a personalized statistical abstraction (in which case the manner is dramatic)? Frankly, I find this question difficult to answer except by making an arbitrary choice.

Or consider Hardy's "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations.'" Do we have a narrator telling us about a primitive farmer, ploughing and burning weeds, and a pair of young lovers; or do we have a thoughtful man meditating upon such figures, which may in fact not even exist except in his own imagination? Again, I find this question almost unanswerable, except by the weak evasion of saying "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

Clearly, my diligent students were shooting arrows at an Achilles' heel. Something had to be done. And a little thought convinced me that the way in which I had posed the question was wrong. In any situation involving attempted explanations of discrete phenomena, the investigator has three possible courses of action. He may ignore the facts which do not fit his hypothesis (this, I realized retrospectively, was what I had done). Or he may try to warp the facts to fit his thesis (and this, I fear, is what my unfortunate and bemused students had been attempting). Or finally, of course, he may decide that his working hypothesis must be revised, perhaps radically, in order to account adequately for *all* the phenomena it seeks to explain. Clearly the sincere inquirer must choose the third alternative. And I now saw where we had gone astray. Since little really useful critical theory on the analysis of lyric poetry has been formulated, I had assumed too facile an analogy between short

poems and either drama or novels. This analogy had proved fallacious.

A little intellectual probing, and some discussion with my students, led in a new direction. *Every* lyric poem has at least one speaker, and *every* lyric poem has an audience The *audience* may or may not coincide with the reader, but let us postpone this question for the time being, and concentrate on the speaker. Instead of pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of whether the speaker functions in a narrative or dramatic manner, it seems far more useful to consider this question: how generalized, or how particularized, is he? Clearly what we have here is a continuum. And again, specific poems will illustrate what I mean.

Hardy's poem presents a speaker who is very generalized. Although I shall refer to him in the masculine gender, we really cannot even tell what his sex is. All we can say about him is that he thinks in Biblical terms, he is thoughtful, and he is mature (how "mature"? we can't answer that question with any degree of specificity, either). Beyond this we cannot go. We cannot even tell what historical period he lives in or what war is causing his reflections. In some anthologies a footnote tells us that the reference is to World War I; many readers may be reminded, however, of the Russian Revolution and Dr. Zhivago, or of our own Civil War, or even of the war in Vietnam. A similarly very generalized speaker is the one in Emily Dickinson's didactic poem, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes." Although we tend to refer to the *speaker* as "she," that is merely because we know the *author* to have been a woman. Nothing in the poem supports the ascription of feminine sex to the speaker. All we really know about her is that she is someone who has probed the human soul deeply enough to instruct us in the handling of terrific psychological traumas. Hughes's speaker is also very generalized. Although the character he is describing is a black, and we know that Hughes himself was a Negro, nothing in the poem warrants our ascribing a particular race to the speaker—or, for that matter, a particular sex. All we can say of him is that he (or she) is someone who appreciates and understands blues and can listen to it for hours (an appreciation which is not dependent on race), and that his ear is sensitive enough to speech to reproduce accurately the dialect in which the Negro musician sings.

At the other extreme we have the speaker in Browning's poem, who is very highly individualized. He is an elderly bishop, worldly, sensuous, and sensual. Lying on his death-bed, he is meditating in a rather hypocritical fashion on the vanity of

human wishes. Yet these reflections are probably inspired more by his sense of what is appropriate to an ecclesiastic's last hours than by any genuine repentance. All his wishes, we discover, have been extremely human. And, in the course of a long and full life, he has realized many of them. He has been a successful rival to another cleric, Gandolf, for the favors of a beautiful woman who has borne him several illegitimate children. He is not only learned—a fine classicist—but also a man of taste and discrimination in the arts as well as in scholarship. He is very much a man of his time and place—the late Italian Renaissance —who rose to a position of influence and power in the Church. His ethical behavior has been none too refined, yet not so flagrant, by the baroque standards of his period, as to get him into trouble. His fiercely competitive attitude has paid off in the past, but will now probably stand him in poor stead, since there is little likelihood his greedy sons will lay themselves out to give him a sumptuous tomb. Yet, on balance, looking back over his rich and varied existence, he can die content with what he has achieved. Everything this speaker says obviously must be interpreted in the light of the very particular kind of man he is, whereas such qualifications carry relatively little weight in the case of Hardy's, Dickinson's, or Hughes's speaker.

When we turn to the audience, we see that the same kind of spectrum exists, from the most generalized of characters to the most highly specific. In Hardy's poem, for example, the audience is anyone—man or woman—who shares the speaker's qualities: maturity, thoughtfulness, and some knowledge of the Bible. Dickinson's poem is addressed to all of us, who share simply because of our humanity the common existential susceptibility to "great pain," which somehow we must develop psychological defenses for coping with. Hughes's poem is addressed to anyone, white or black, man or woman, who shares the speaker's receptivity to the poignance of blues. The audience for the Browning poem, however, is highly specific: the illegitimate sons of the bishop, in particular Anselm. Although they never speak, we can infer a good many of their qualities. They are, like their father, worldly, sensuous, sensual, and learned (he tempts them with prospects of horses, Greek manuscripts, and glorious mistresses). But they have derived certain other characteristics from their mother: they are greedy, calculating, and selfish.

It will be observed from this discussion that the audience may or may not coincide with the reader. In the case of the Hardy, Dickinson, and Hughes poems it does; in the case of the Browning poem it definitely does not. But let us turn now to two poems in which the audience occupies a position at mid-point be-

tween these two extremes. The audience in John Crowe Ransom's "Here Lies a Lady" seems to be a group of young women the speaker finds rather endearing ("Sweet ladies"), and for whom he wishes a long and happy life. But the reader is not necessarily a member of this group, although she may be. Or consider Herrick's charming little *carpe diem* poem, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." This poem presents a special problem, since we must decide whether it is didactic or mimetic. If it is the former, we should judge it in terms of the doctrine it presents and the arguments marshalled in support of this doctrine: girls, live it up while you're young and get husbands; if you wait too long, you'll lose your chances. On the other hand, if this is a mimetic poem, then it can be more fully explained by interpreting this advice not as a universal dictum, but as the counsel a certain kind of person would give in a certain mood to a certain kind of audience.

For the moment, let us hold this question in abeyance and consider the speaker. He is a mature person, though again we cannot tell whether man or woman. He is thoughtful, but also fun-loving and merry. And he has lived long enough to be aware that the blood cools with age; that certain things must be enjoyed in youth, or they will not be enjoyed at all.

Now let us turn to his audience: unmarried young women, but of no particular historical period or culture. The problem here is that the audience does not exactly coincide with the reader. Many young women have doubtless been instructed by this poem—if it is didactic. But it is certain that they have been delighted by it, since it presents the spectacle of a wise elder furnishing girls like themselves with good grounds for something they would enjoy doing anyway. However, many young men have read this poem with delight, too, and so have many older persons. These considerations would impel us to believe that the poem is mimetic, and that the instruction imparted to its audience of virgins is subsidiary to the delight with which it affects all its readers. In other words, what we take pleasure in is the effective rendering of the situation of a mature, thoughtful person who has reached certain conclusions about a moral choice on an important issue in life, and who is now presenting the results of his deliberations to an audience who he thinks will be particularly receptive to his conclusions.

As these examples show, we must recognize that the audience and the reader are not necessarily one and the same. They may be, there may be a wide disparity between the two, or there may be a partial overlap. And an answer to this problem may, in

turn, help us to decide whether a given poem is didactic or mimetic.

So far as critical theory is concerned, then, I believe that such questions as these are far more fruitful in discussing representation in lyric poetry than are those based on an analogy with prose fiction and drama, which all too often lead us into a frustrating cul de sac. Obviously, these considerations do not exhaust those that we may deal with concerning representation in lyric poetry. There are, for example, questions about the attitude that the speaker takes toward what he is talking about, his attitude toward his audience, and the attitude that he tries to induce in his audience. It seems to me that much of the charm of Ransom's haunting poem lies in the attitude the speaker takes toward the dead lady. Clearly he feels that in some way the beautiful, well-born young matron has been particularly fortunate in the manner of her death, surrounded as she is by anxious, attentive, concerned relatives and physicians. This young wife has obviously been petted and adored, in death as well as in life. Although we are perhaps not entirely justified in inferring that something of the capricious and wayward pattern of her death marked her life, too, there can be no doubt that some such evocative aura hovers around our impression of her, since we feel that her death was an appropriate finale to her short life. The speaker in Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" has a somewhat similar attitude to another youthful person whose life ended just as it was cresting. And yet these similarities serve also to emphasize the differences. Housman's speaker is grave, contemplative, and philosophic. Ransom's is witty, dry, ironic, and urbane. We sense that for him an attractive woman has a childlike quality, even in death.

There are also questions of possible discrepancies between the attitude aroused in the audience, and the attitude or emotional effects aroused in the reader; and between the attitude the speaker displays toward his subject and the attitude the reader takes toward it. Again, we may or may not have coincidences here. But the questions we can raise about the representation, when we approach it from the point of view I have outlined in this essay, are illuminating.

Other considerations involved in representation in lyric poetry deal with selection, order, and emphasis. Why, for example, is only a short period on the bishop's death-bed selected for representation? Or why are a farmer and a pair of young lovers selected in the Hardy poem, rather than—say—a fisherman and an old Darby and Joan?

Questions of order, too, must be considered. Why does the speaker in "Mr. Flood's Party" compare Eben first to Roland, then to a young mother, instead of the other way around? Why does the speaker in Auden's poem tell us first about the Unknown Citizen's factory work, then about his "proper opinions," and then about his family life? Why this order rather than some other one?

And finally, questions of emphasis are involved. Certain general guidelines can be useful here. One, of course, is mere length; what details get the most lines in the poem? More subtly, position also involves emphasis. The opening lines and the closing lines of a short lyric poem are nearly always positions of tremendous emphasis. If you want to test this, take any poem at random, read the first two or three lines and the last two or three lines, and see if you have not got a highly condensed version of the entire poem. Obviously what the poet puts in these critical positions must be chosen with great care. Still another principle operative here is what has been called "syntactic emphasis." [2] For example, William Carlos Williams' little poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," is only a single sentence long, divided into four short stanzas. Syntactically, the first, third, and fourth all depend on the second: "a red wheel / barrow," thus emphasizing its central position in the poem. This "syntactic emphasis" is a particularly subtle representational device when we notice the first stanza: "so much depends / upon."

And finally, of course, we have all those other questions associated with the resources of the language: rhythm, metre, rhyme, tone color, onomatopoeia, images, etc. But I shall not weary you further. Many handbooks on poetry have devoted a great deal of attention to these: so much, in fact, that more fundamental problems of representation which I have addressed myself to in this paper have been almost completely ignored. Nor have I said anything at all about ways of approaching the object of imitation in these poems; that is matter for another essay.

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[2] I am indebted to Morris Finder, Associate Professor of English Education, State University of New York at Albany, for the concept and the term.

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